

'Munitionettes' in a London factory, May 1918

WAKE

by Anna Hope

Set in 1920, *Wake* (2014) focuses on the lasting impact of the First World War (1914–18) on three women. The novel explores a London traumatised by grief, learning how to live with the aftershocks of the conflict

Historical context

Ritual for the dead — the Unknown Warrior

Wake focuses on those killed in one arena of the war — Evelyn's fiancé Fraser, Ada's son Michael and Ivy's son Joe are among the 564,715 British Army dead on the Western Front. The uncertainty about the final resting places of many of the soldiers, and the lack of any tangible remains over which to mourn, added another level of pain. Anna Hope said:

Standing in [the military cemeteries in France]... I started to understand... the impact of the decision of the British Government not to bring any of the bodies home. On a practical level you can understand why — the cost and logistics of bringing back the bodies of close to a million men would have been incredibly high. But what did that mean for the people who grieved those men?... In that context the decision to bring home

one body — The Unknown Warrior — to stand for all those who had died, starts to make sense.

The journey of the Unknown Warrior through London on Armistice Day 1920 is the climax of *Wake*. It clearly had an extraordinarily cathartic impact on the many thousands who attended the event:

The dead man who had set out without a name, a voice, or a face only a few hours before was being invested with a hundred thousand likenesses... The authorities had made certain [the ceremony] would be dignified; they never dreamt it would be overwhelming.

(Blythe 1963, p. 10)

Over 200,000 people filed past the open grave that day, and half a million within the month.

Social and political context

A land fit for heroes

Although the prime minister, Lloyd George, had promised soldiers that they would return to 'a land fit for heroes' after the Armistice, the reality was very different. Evelyn's work in the Pensions Department exposes her to long queues of veterans — amputees like Robin and Rowan, and sufferers from shellshock like Hettie's brother Fred. For the working class particularly, prospects for the future were bleak: 'Pensions had collapsed and unemployment was already endemic in some communities. The cost of living had risen while for the poorest paid workers wages remained little higher than their pre-war level' (Nicholson 2009, p. 77). After the postwar boom of 1919–20 ended, UK unemployment rose sharply to over 10% and stayed high.

Munitionettes

Nearly one million women worked in munitions industries during the war. Evelyn's experiences — losing a finger and being poisoned by the explosive TNT — show the inherent dangers of the work. Others were even less fortunate — explosions at British munitions factories during the war resulted in 240 deaths. Despite this, women had found financial independence as a result of their war-time work. However, the closure of munitions factories and the 1919 Restoration of Pre-War Practices Act, which guaranteed returning soldiers their old jobs, meant that by 1920 a million fewer women were in employment, and a quarter of working women had been compelled to return to their earlier roles in domestic service.

Dancing for a living — sixpence a dance

Other women, however, were finding new forms of employment, as represented by Hettie's job at the Hammersmith Palais. Nearly 6,000 tickets were sold for the Palais' opening night in November 1919, testimony to the desire for the new music that was to become such a keynote of the 1920s — the Jazz Age. The reasonable cost of entrance made it accessible to all, and its 'evening dress optional' policy created a democratic and innovative form of entertainment. If Evelyn's work in munitions and pensions is a grim reminder of the war's destructive shadow, Hettie's work is looking to a future in which entrenched views — including those about the rights of women — would be challenged.

Gender context

Wake — to emerge from sleep

The sense of excitement suggested in this epigraph comes across very clearly in an interview with Anna Hope:

I was interested in new freedoms for women in the wake of the war. I came of age in the Manchester rave culture of the 1990s... I remember first encountering that feeling of complete freedom on the dancefloor... It was an experience that felt revolutionary. I was looking to capture a similar feeling when writing about Hettie. What would it have been like to hear the Original Dixieland Jazz Band for the first time?... What would it have felt like for Hettie to have been able to move her body on the dancefloor in ways that were unimaginable a few years before?

(Hope 2025)

It's clearly no coincidence that the novel ends in the dance hall, where the band 'keeps up a fractured, pulsing rhythm' under the sound of the trumpeter.

RESOURCES

Blythe, R. (1963) *The Age of Illusion: England in the Twenties and Thirties*, Hamish Hamilton.

Hope, A. (2025) Interview with Caroline Barrett: <https://www.annahope.uk>

Nicholson, J. (2009) *The Great Silence 1918–1920: Living in the Shadow of the Great War*, John Murray.

Woollacott, A. (1994) *On Her Their Lives Depend: Munitions Workers in the Great War*, University of California Press.

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